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RANJIT LAL

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Author's Note

The landscape of Delhi seems to be changing faster than ever. In just a few months, new roads, new flyovers and the Metro rail project have rendered some areas unrecognizable, and sadly, most of this means bad news for the birds of the city. Urban development along the banks of the Jamuna is playing havoc with waterside habitats, and grand old trees that provided safe nesting for scores of birds of many species are being felled indiscriminately since their inability to move makes them a major obstruction in the execution of the Metro project. Alipur Road in north Delhi has, for example, suffered hugely; the skyline here has changed entirely, and the poor remnants of the Qudsia gardens are now under attack. On the plus side, however, birdwatching is rapidly gaining popularity amongst the capital's citizens with the reactivated Delhi Bird Club spearheading the way. One of its leading lights, Bill Harvey, recently discovered a wonderful water-bird habitat at Basai, just outside Gurgaon and *en route* to Sultanpur, by watching a flock of bar-headed geese land while he stood waiting at a railway crossing! As a water-bird habitat, Basai is now rivaling Sultanpur for supremacy. Let us hope there are many more Basais waiting to be discovered in the areas around Delhi.

R. L.

June 2002
Delhi

Preface

In this book you will meet several of Delhi's more colourful, interesting, and remarkable inhabitants—its birds. Any newcomer to the city will have become aware (even if dimly so) of some of its avian inhabitants—the gurgling rock doves that are fed at street corners, sparrows that shrilly strut around like roadside Romeos, 'green chillie' parakeets tearing apart the evening skies with their screams, *mynas* engaged in raucous brawls in parks, crows clearing up after messy picnic parties, and kites diving down from the skies to pick up run-over rats from the streets.

There are, however, many more, of bewildering variety, colour, and habits. As we go along, you will learn where they hang out, when (and whether) they come and go, and where and when they nest. You will also learn of the dangers they face and their uncertain future as we heedlessly continue to encroach upon and destroy their habitats. While I have mentioned specific sites where I have seen particular species, these are by no means all-inclusive; these only typify the habitat the bird prefers; thus any park or large garden with great, leafy, ancient trees is likely to harbour owls, hornbills, parakeets, mynas, barbets, and other hole nesters. The sites I have mentioned are those I am familiar with.

The order in which the birds appear is based on the relatively recent (1988) Sibley and Munroe system of classification, which links bird families together by the closeness of their DNA affiliations. I have also used the recently introduced common names

from *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region* by Inskipp et al.,[1] but have, for convenience, also mentioned the 'old', often more familiar, names within brackets. Names in Hindi follow the scientific name in order of appearance. Thus, for example: Grey Francolin (Grey Partridge), *Francolinus pondicerianus*, Teetar.

I have, in this book, quite deliberately emphasized on the 'here' and 'now' of the birds of Delhi, and touched but lightly upon the abundance of the past. Those of you interested in bygone birding may see Usha Ganguli's wonderful classic, *A Guide to the Birds of the Delhi Area* and H. P. W. Hutson's *Birds about Delhi*,[2] though both are now out of print and may be difficult to get hold of.

Delhiites are gradually becoming aware of, and enthused by the wonderful variety of birds that share their city with them. With this book, I hope that many many more are encouraged to do so.

[1] Inskipp T., N. Lindsey and W. Duckworh, *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region*, Oriental Bird Club: Sandy, UK, 1996.

[2] Usha Ganguli, *A Guide to the Birds of the Delhi Area* , Indian Council for Agricultural Research, 1975; H. P. W. Hutson, *Birds about Delhi*, Delhi Birdwatching Society, 1954.

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54. Red Avadavat or Red Munia
55. Silverbill or White-throated Munia

I

THE FLIGHT OF THE SHIKRA

University Gardens, where again the specimen concerned appeared to be engaged in nest building. The nesting season lasts from July to October, and a globular nests is constructed out of grass and placed low down in a bush. Four to eight white eggs are laid and both parents look after the chicks.

The Black-headed Munia (*Lonchura malacca*, Nakal Nar) 14 cm, is a chestnut and black munia, of which one race has a white belly and undersides and a black vent, as compared with the other's entirely black and chestnut plumage. I have seen the black and chestnut version on a few occasions in the reed beds along the Jamuna, and fields south of Okhla, but the birds are certainly not as common as the other members of their family.

Commom Rosefinch, *Carpodacus erythrinus*, Lal Tuti

This fluffed-up-looking finch with a stout conical bill looks as though it has been helping itself to a jar of strawberry jam. Its head, chin, and throat are deep strawberry pink, the upper parts beige brown tinged with pink (the jam gets everywhere!), the pale off-white belly streaked pinkish, further reiterating the streaked strawberry effect. The females do not dip into the jam and are olive brown, with fine streaking on the head, breast and sides of the throat, and have two white wing bars.

Rosefinches are winter visitors and stay in small numbers between Septembr and April. The reed-fringed areas along the river and surrounding grasslands are favourite haunts as are the scrub woodlands of the Ridge. They may join silverbills and sparrows at the feeding spots in parks (Buddha Jyanti Park, for example) and so it is always sensible to check these out. The number of birds increases towards April when additions stop over en route to their breeding grounds up north (in the Himalayas). I have seen them on the northern Ridge and at Deer Park (helping themselves to mulberries not strawberries!) and Buddha Jayanti Park.

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